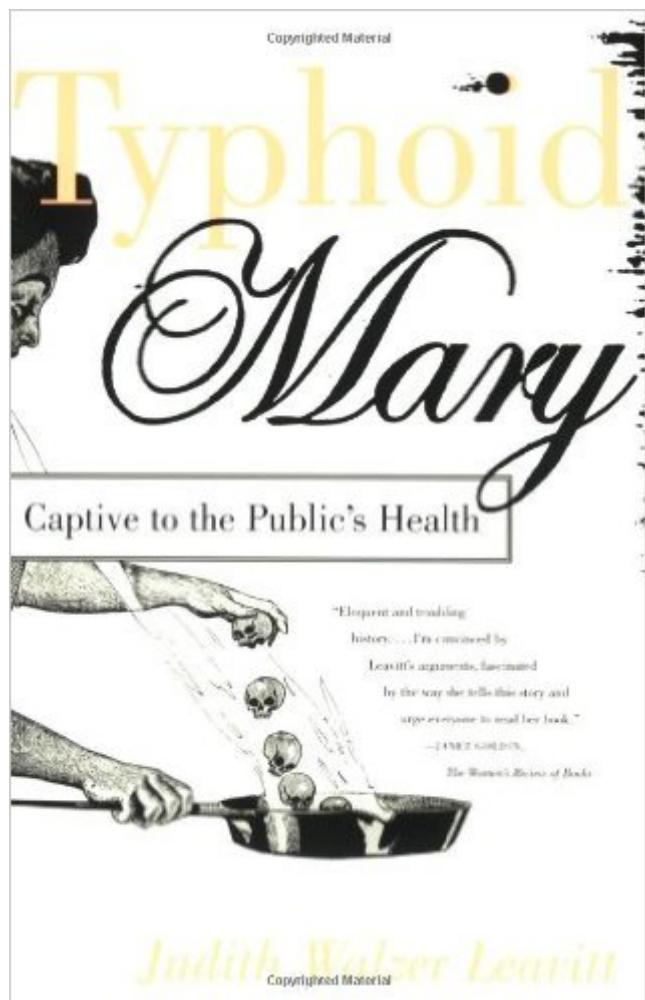


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# Typhoid Mary: Captive To The Public's Health



## Synopsis

She was an Irish immigrant cook. Between 1900 and 1907, she infected twenty-two New Yorkers with typhoid fever through her puddings and cakes; one of them died. Tracked down through epidemiological detective work, she was finally apprehended as she hid behind a barricade of trashcans. To protect the public's health, authorities isolated her on Manhattan's North Brother Island, where she died some thirty years later. This book tells the remarkable story of Mary Mallon--the real Typhoid Mary. Combining social history with biography, historian Judith Leavitt re-creates early-twentieth-century New York City, a world of strict class divisions and prejudice against immigrants and women. Leavitt engages the reader with the excitement of the early days of microbiology and brings to life the conflicting perspectives of journalists, public health officials, the law, and Mary Mallon herself. Leavitt's readable account illuminates dilemmas that continue to haunt us. To what degree are we willing to sacrifice individual liberty to protect the public's health? How far should we go in the age of AIDS, drug-resistant tuberculosis, and other diseases? For anyone who is concerned about the threats and quandaries posed by new epidemics, Typhoid Mary is a vivid reminder of the human side of disease and disease control.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Leavitt's book, *Typhoid Mary*, attempts to reconstruct the life and times of Mary Mallon, the first identified typhoid carrier in the United States. Mary Mallon was an Irish immigrant, and worked as a cook among the elite families of New York city. She is also the centerpiece of one of the scientific

advances of the twentieth century: the understanding that some illnesses are caused by germs, rather than vague miasmas, and that apparently healthy individuals can spread these germs to others. An understanding of this scientific truth, however, raises an even more puzzling question: how can the public address these individuals who, through no bad acts on their part, are able to risk the public's health? Leavitt analyzes Mary's story with the use of seven different perspectives: that of medicine, public policy, the law, social expectations, newspaper accounts, her own, and the story's modern retelling. These seven accounts combine to provide the reader a full account of the medical and social conditions of the day, and how they combined to account for Mary's lifelong isolation. The research on this book is well-done and the writing interesting. My biggest complaint was that some of the material is repetitive, as the different perspectives do overlap at times.

Less a history of Mary Mallon herself than of how the U.S. reacted to typhoid, *Typhoid Mary* makes for an interesting look into turn-of-the-century understandings of epidemiology and public health. Leavitt does a nice job of telling the story of how Mary was identified as a vector for typhoid and of how she was treated by the state of New York. However, the book is laced with lots of analysis and attempts to draw connections between the way typhoid was treated/viewed in the late 1800s and early 1900s and with how AIDS has been treated/viewed in the late 1900s. These connections are valid and interesting, but the manner in which they are scattered throughout the text become a bit distracting. This said, *Typhoid Mary* remains enlightening and interesting reading.

*Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public's Health* by Judith Walzer Leavitt could be shorter. Not much shorter, just a bit shorter. The beginning of the book is surprisingly dull and a great deal of information is repeated unnecessarily. That said, *Typhoid Mary* is very well-written, even the dull bits. The research is well-documented and complete. And the subject matter is more than a little engrossing. Who was the woman behind the label "Typhoid Mary"? Leavitt is making the link between typhoid and AIDS, in particular the problem of finding the balance between protecting individual rights and protecting the community. She spends time on this subject towards the end of the book and has some compassionate and reasonable things to say. The strongest part of the book, however, is in the history and in Leavitt's appreciation of Mary Mallon as an individual. The most interesting parts of the book (and where the writing picks up considerably) are the chapters on the public perception of Typhoid Mary throughout the 20th century. Recommendation: Buy it if it's a subject that already interests you. Otherwise, check it out of the library.

This book has the potential to be quite good; Mary Mallon's story and the ethical questions it raises are fascinating and as relevant today as they were nearly one hundred years ago. However, Leavitt's prose is so redundant and unorganized that it distracts from what could be a very interesting read. A reviewer of another one of her books phrased it quite well: "while the author makes good use of quotations and historical information, so much of each chapter is repeated that I would liken it to reading while banging ones head against a wall." Her habit of beginning each chapter with an explanation of its purpose in the first person ( "In this chapter, I examine the legal perspective on Mary Mallon's situation" "In this chapter, I explore some of the social expectations...") and closing with a series of rhetorical questions is, quite frankly, lazy writing. Her style comes off as rather pedantic, constantly using the inclusive "we" and "us" ("Mallon's story reminds us..." "We as a society have decisions to make..." "We can understand..." etc.) Leavitt seems to be committed to stating the obvious and doesn't trust her readers to remember what she wrote mere pages before. By page 60., Leavitt had told Mary's whole story about four times. The book was also missing the narrative arc and character development that I have come to expect from good historical nonfiction. The subject matter is very well researched but when the diary excerpts and personal accounts from the historical figures in question are better written and more compelling than the actual book, it makes for a tiresome read. This book badly needed a good edit and could have been about 50 pages shorter. As a college student who had to read this book for class, I would consider it to be good work at the senior undergraduate level, but I expected much more from a PhD with a publishing team.

I thought that this story would be much more revealing than it was. The same information is repeated in each chapter and I wish it was more of a story of the Mary Mallon and less of the government policies re: her captivity.

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